

# An Alternative Approach to Improving Listening Skills

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The ideal environment for improving in a second language is one where the target language is spoken and heard at all times. However, in learning situations where the opportunities for oral practice are much fewer than for listening, more attention should be given in teaching to exercises that link listening to an improvement of speaking skills.

Over the years, there have been numerous articles on how learners can improve their listening comprehension. A few recent ones, for example, are Wajnryb (1991); Murphy (1991); Eastman (1991); and Hickey (1991). This article will concentrate on listening exercises that can also serve as springboards for oral practice. Three particular listening-related methods of language learning will be discussed: interviewing, transcribing, and shadow-reading. First the teacher's role in initiating these activities will be discussed, and then the students' role will be considered.

## **The Teacher's Role**

There is an abundance of listening material available in the form of local radio programmes in English in Hong Kong. A good source of listening practice is phone-in programmes, where callers of varying nationalities participate and talk about a wide range of topics and personal concerns from the absurd and mundane to the most serious. It is up to the teacher to decide which would be applicable to his/her students in terms of relevance, interest, length, and comprehensibility of topics and speakers.

The following steps are recommended:

1. The teacher tapes the relevant programmes and chooses whatever would be suitable for his/her students. After choosing a specific taped phone call, for example, for class use, the teacher can proceed to transcribe the tape. It is recommended to use short but interesting portions of the tapes. If phone-in programmes are not available, the teacher can, alternatively, conduct a short interview with a native speaker. It is necessary that the interview be kept short; otherwise the listening exercise gets too long and possibly boring for students, and the process of transcribing the tape also becomes too laborious.
2. The teacher plays the tape for the students. No contextual clues are given about the tape apart from its source, e.g., in this case, a phone-in radio programme or an interview with a native speaker. The students are asked to listen to the tape, writing down notes if they want to.
3. At the end of the tape, the teacher asks the students how much they have understood. More often than not, depending on their level of listening comprehension, the students will not have understood much of what the tape was about. They will claim that the speaker goes too fast for

them. Speed, in fact, is the most common reason given for difficulty with listening comprehension.

4. The teacher then plays the tape a second time, asking the students to write down any individual words that they manage to pick out from what may seem to them a sea of incomprehensible sounds.

5. During this part, the teacher asks the students to call out any words they have heard in the order they came on the tape. The teacher writes these words on the board.

6. With this list in front of them, the students are asked if the list of words gives them any clue as to what the tape is all about. Normally at this point a few will make some guesses. This stage is important because the interaction between the teacher and the students is natural and purposeful, with the teacher asking the students about their spontaneous reactions and impressions, and their problems with understanding the discussions.

7. Next the teacher gives the students the tapescript. Calling on students at random, the teacher asks individuals to read the tapescript aloud.

8. After the reading of the tapescript, the teacher plays the tape again, but this time the students shadow-read the tapescript, i.e., they read the script with the tape. Shadow-reading gives them a good first-hand experience of the speed at which a native speaker speaks, and also helps them with things like stress, pronunciation, phrasing, and accent. The teacher can give the students a great deal of help and guidance on these matters. Listening to tapes and shadow-reading tapescripts can be a source of great improvement and enjoyment to students. This activity can easily take a single period of about 40-45 minutes.

## **The Students' Role**

The teacher-conducted activities described above are a starter for the student-centred activities to follow: interviews, transcriptions, and presentations.

1. *Group Interviews.* One activity that students find interesting and challenging is interviewing foreigners. These interviews give them a chance to talk to native speakers, something that otherwise they would hesitate to do because they feel shy and inadequate. In countries where native speakers are hardly available, the next best thing is to find a good second-language speaker.

Firstly, the groups should discuss with the teacher the topic and the general questions to be used in the interviews. It is essential to start with this activity; otherwise, the students may end up asking questions that invite a very short answer—a word, a phrase, or at the most a short sentence—and this is not useful for the objective of the activity, i.e., listening to spoken language. It is also a good idea to limit the number of questions, for two reasons: (1) it gives the students focal points for their listening, which can be used later as topics for discussion, and (2) it makes transcribing the tape less of a burden for the students.

It is advisable to make sure that the division of labour between who does the questioning and who does the transcribing is made clear among themselves beforehand. As long as the class agrees on the basic interview questions, it is best to leave it to them and their subjects how long the interview should be.

The students are then given a week or two to conduct their interviews and to transcribe their tapes. The final scripts, as can be imagined, will provide a wealth of material for points of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation and for discussions of ideas and reactions. One of the disadvantages of an interview with a native speaker is that interviewees sometimes choose to speak much more slowly and exaggerate their enunciation of words, not realising that this may be unhelpful for learners in the long run.

2. *Transcribing*. There are occasions when specificity and accuracy are more demanding in production than in comprehension (Ringbom 1992). Asking students to transcribe tapes of their own interviews is a case in point. Having the conversation on tape allows them to listen purposefully to native speakers as many times as they want and need to. However, student transcriptions also reveal their inaccuracies in grammar, and sometimes also the sources of their errors. The following samples of student efforts to transcribe tapescripts give interesting insights into sources of students' errors in listening and interpreting. The students left a blank where they did not understand the tape at all and underlined words they were not sure of.

### TAPESCRIPT A:

*Students:* Could you tell us how do you feel about the future of Hong Kong and the 1997?

*Interviewee:* C v gate question. Let me see. I don't think the chariest government wants to change anything in Hong Kong because they want the money that Hong Kong can provide them and if they change try to change things then they will beggarly the money they need. So I think what we will in US say "\_\_\_\_\_ the goods and \_\_\_\_\_ gold and egg" which means that if you stop Hong Kong from make a lot of money we will no longer produce gold and egg. If they did things hurt Hong Kong, they will hurt themselves.

The first thing to point out to the students is the errors in their question "Could you tell us how do you feel about the future of Hong Kong and the 1997?" Errors of this type in the question should be eradicated.

It is interesting that the tapescripts have only two blank spaces and two underlined words-C v gate and chariest. The underlined words are guesses, based on what the students heard. C-v-gate was in fact "complicated" and chariest, "communist." Missing "complicated" is understandable, as the cryptic form "complicated question," with little supporting context, might well tax many second-language learners. Context, however, should have been able to help with the second mistake, since the phrase *communist government* is commonly used in the context of Hong Kong's return to China in 1997.

In fact, when asked later, everyone claimed they were familiar with the word communist. They thought that perhaps the word they heard was one of the many words they did not know. In this

case, what they lacked was inferencing skill rather than vocabulary knowledge. Inferencing, of course, is not an easy skill to learn. Training has to be provided by teachers until the students develop more confidence in it (Nuttall 1982; Moran 1991).

However, more interesting than errors they were aware of (the underlined words) were the errors they seemed unaware of. For example, . . . *then they will beggarly the money they need*. Again, the word they have chosen to represent the sound they heard does not make any sense. It should have read . . . *then they will be . . . get the money they need*. The speaker first said *be*, then immediately changed to *get*. This is the kind of error that can be used to introduce a little grammar teaching. They should have known that the word they needed to supply was a verb. Integrating grammar instruction with opportunities for meaningful communication is certainly a much more effective way of learning grammar (Fotos and Ellis 1991).

The other mistake in this transcription came from ignorance of the proverb about “killing the goose that lays the golden egg.” They thought the interviewee was referring to goods and gold and egg. Again, this can be a fruitful source of instruction, showing how proverbs are used in real-life English.

Despite the errors in this transcription, however, the students did grasp the general idea of what the interviewee was saying, i.e., if China did things to hurt Hong Kong, they would only hurt themselves.

The process of transcribing the tape and presenting the transcription to the class is certainly time-consuming for the students. However, it has the advantage of involving everyone in something they are interested in and enthusiastic about. One of the drawbacks in this exercise is that there are good and bad speakers even among native speakers. If the students happen to interview a notably bad speaker, one who repeats too much or pauses and hesitates too much, they may not be getting the ideal role model. On the other hand, there are advantages in exposing the students to a real-life variety of speakers. The following tapescript is an example of a dysfluent speaker:

## **TAPESCRIPT B**

Q: How do you feel about 1997 and the future of Hong Kong?

A: Hmm . . . it . . . hmmm it is very difficult to say. I . . . I took a class last term, a course on this issue, the “Basic Law and the Future of Hong Kong.” Hmm, I am not sure exactly what I think will happen. Well, I think it is . . . it is very important for the people of Hong Kong to make sure that, hmm, that, ahh, what they want is known by the Chinese and . . . ah . . . for the Chinese government, the PRC, to know how the Chinese people of Hong Kong feel. If you . . . if you like the way you live, then you need to tell the Chinese. If you like it this way and that, hmm, you want to stay the same you have to tell them.

Because the speaker talked clearly and slowly, the students’ transcription here was pretty accurate. However, when the tape was being listened to intensively by the whole class, the speaker’s pauses and repetitions became so obvious that they sounded funny and began to distract the listeners.

This would be a good time for the teacher to point out that native speakers, too, can be dysfluent and that it is up to the listener not to be distracted by “Hmms” from the main points of the speaker.

There are, of course, cases where taped interviews are simply unintelligible to the students. This will result in a transcription that is also fairly incomprehensible because of the number of blanks. In this case the problem was the speaker’s accent. Hong Kong students are more familiar with standard American and British accents, and find some other accents, like pronounced Irish, Scots, Australian, or South African, difficult to follow. Below is an example of such a case:

### **TAPESCRIPT C**

Q: Would you leave Hong Kong because of the problem of 1997?

A: You are asking me a question \_\_\_\_\_ know the answer to. I mean \_\_\_\_\_ socially acceptable \_\_\_\_\_ but I honestly don’t know. OK. If you want a \_\_\_\_\_ now, I \_\_\_\_\_ that it doesn’t really \_\_\_\_\_ me ’97 because I’ve got a foreign passport. I came here with nothing. So, even if the Chinese come \_\_\_\_\_ in and say right, all foreigners get out \_\_\_\_\_ leave all things you’ve got, pay all you \_\_\_\_\_ in terms of the fine \_\_\_\_\_ It doesn’t worry me because I’m young and I don’t have children.

Such a listening exercise becomes more like a cloze test or a kind of guessing game to see what expressions may fit the missing spaces. This, of course, can bring up interesting points for discussion and useful language-learning opportunities in the class. The activity is natural; the problem is immediate and challenging. Even from the small number of comprehensible parts, the students can get to the speaker’s main point, namely, that the 1997 issue does not worry the interviewee one bit.

It is interesting that of the three sample interviews and transcriptions, this last one needed the most help from the teacher. With an unfamiliar accent, playing back the incomprehensible parts even three or four times sometimes does not help.

3. Shadow-Reading. At this stage, shadow-reading can be a very stimulating and enjoyable listening exercise.

Firstly, the students read the script silently while listening to the tape. Then the tape is played in short portions, with the students reading aloud along with the tape. Be warned that this part of the exercise can be confusing and very noisy, but also enjoyable and sometimes hilarious for the students. Some students can keep up with the interviewee’s speech while others cannot. Not all of the tape should be shadow-read by all the class together. The teacher can call on individual students to shadow-read parts of the tape.

The purpose of this shadow-reading is to give the students experience with the differences in tone, stress, accent, and pronunciation among different varieties of English, and also to show them how they stand in relation to native-speaker speech.

A particularly useful aspect of the activities discussed in this article is the way the listening exercise naturally leads into class/group/pair discussions. This is especially true if the topic that has been chosen for interviews encourages opposing views. The class, for example, may be asked to discuss whether they agree or disagree with the interviewees. Or they may have further questions that they may want to ask about the interview.

## Conclusion

This article has discussed ways of improving listening comprehension through the use of interviewing, transcribing, and shadow-reading. Language learning can be made realistic and challenging, as well as fun, by actually using the target language to interact with native speakers. Through guided and intensive listening to taped interviews, the level of awareness and the listening skills of students can be improved. Also, through shadow-reading of tapescripts, students are able to “experience” target-language speech as they follow the normal speed, tone, phrasing, stress, and pronunciation of the native speaker. Activities of this sort, different from the normal run of textbook language learning, are practical and enjoyable ways of improving listening skills and can lead to more confidence in speaking the target language.

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